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An Educational Program to Enhance Experiential Aspects of Small Rural Business Websites

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Background

Small businesses comprise a majority of rural firms, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all establishments (McDaniel, 2001). Nationally, small, independently owned businesses are also substantial, accounting for over 90% of all U.S. business activities (Scarborough & Zimmerer, 2003). Small rural firms have demonstrated particular dominance in the services industries, including retail, hospitality, and tourism businesses. However, many rural entrepreneurs lack know-how, resources, and strategies to compete successfully in today's business environment. For small rural businesses, lack of knowledge concerning online marketing strategies, small technology budgets, and technological limitations in rural communities lead to underdeveloped business websites. Although rural businesses may not be able to implement as many advanced technologies as larger firms, they are able to enhance aspects of their online marketing strategies to remain competitive, such as creating a unique, yet consistent, firm image. Building firm image (i.e., unique, positive feelings and meanings associated with a company) is seen as vital to differentiating one's business from competitors, which is important for business success (Aaker, 1996). However, it appears that small rural firms may view their websites as a tool (a means to an end), not as an integrated component of their overall business strategy that focuses on a unified presence or image for the firm (Mhango, Marcketti, & Niehm, 2005).

Educational Program to Enhance Experiential Aspects

Scholars of land-grant universities have witnessed an increased expectation to participate in professional practice activities, where academic expertise is applied to assist "real world" constituents, such as rural small businesses. Building upon specialized academic expertise, an interdisciplinary group of educators from three programs have developed an externally funded program for educating rural small businesses, including textile and apparel retail businesses, on ways to enhance aspects of their website designs. In particular, this program helps small business operators develop a consistent experiential image between a firm's brick-and-mortar location and website, required to give the customer a clear message about the business and enhance customer value (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). The educational program, while funded for dissemination through Extension, will also contribute course materials to undergraduate and graduate e-commerce courses in both our textiles and clothing and hospitality programs.



Pine and Gilmore (1999) define experiences as sensations that occur within an individual when a business intentionally and successfully engages the individual on an emotional, physical, intellectual, and/or spiritual level. They assert that experience-rich offerings are derived from four realms of experience, termed the 4Es: entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism. The proposed program helps rural businesses adopt these 4E experiential strategies and create consistent customer experiences between the brick-and-mortar location and web presence for their business. Research supports the importance of an experience-rich website to enhance enjoyment and to positively affect consumer responses such as purchasing products and cultivating attitude towards a business (e.g., Aladwani & Palvia, 2002; Fiore, Jin, & Kim, 2005).

However, we have not found guidelines for using 4E strategies to develop an experience-rich website. Our proposed educational program helps fill this gap. This program builds upon group members' expertise in e-commerce, experiential consumer behavior, marketing, program evaluation, retailing, small business development, and tourism. The program enhances a) understanding of experiential strategies to add customer value for a firm, b) assessment of marketing/experiential strategies used in or appropriate for the firm's bricks-and-mortar location, c) understanding of experiential strategies applicable to the firm's website design, and d) enhancement and/or alignment of the experiential nature of the firm's website with the bricks-and-mortar location to create a unified firm image.

The educational program, reviewed by an Extension educator, consists of over 150 PowerPoint slides in five lessons on a CD-ROM. The lessons are supported by (a) four business/website assessment worksheets (MS Word files), (b) visual examples of retailer, bed and breakfast inn, restaurant, and agri-tourism businesses/websites, (c) reference materials and links, and (d) PowerPoint lesson outline slides and an Extension educator's training guide (including program evaluation materials) also on the CD-ROM. The training guide familiarizes educators with the curriculum and ways to facilitate its use with small rural business owners/operators. The guide will include plans for conducting a training session during the Extension educators' update meeting where computer stations are available. The CD-ROMs, provided to individual business operators, allow easy access to the image-rich lessons by those in rural areas without broadband connections. They also allow presentation by Extension educators to rural audiences in areas without broadband connections. In addition, the CD-ROM content will be uploaded to Extension websites for distribution to the public across the U.S, including university educators and students.

Evaluation

The Extension educators' program evaluation materials assess the impact of the curriculum products on the target audience. Data to be collected include the number of Extension website hits, CD-ROM copies distributed, attendance at dissemination events, and telephone/e-mail survey responses. In the long run, Extension educators can measure the impact of program implementation on businesses by tapping "before and after" data on the business' customer counts, website interaction counts, and consumer evaluations.



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